

An Essay  
on The  
Character and qualifications  
of  
the Physician

---

Respectfully submitted to the  
Faculty of the Homoeopathic  
Medical College of Pennsylvania

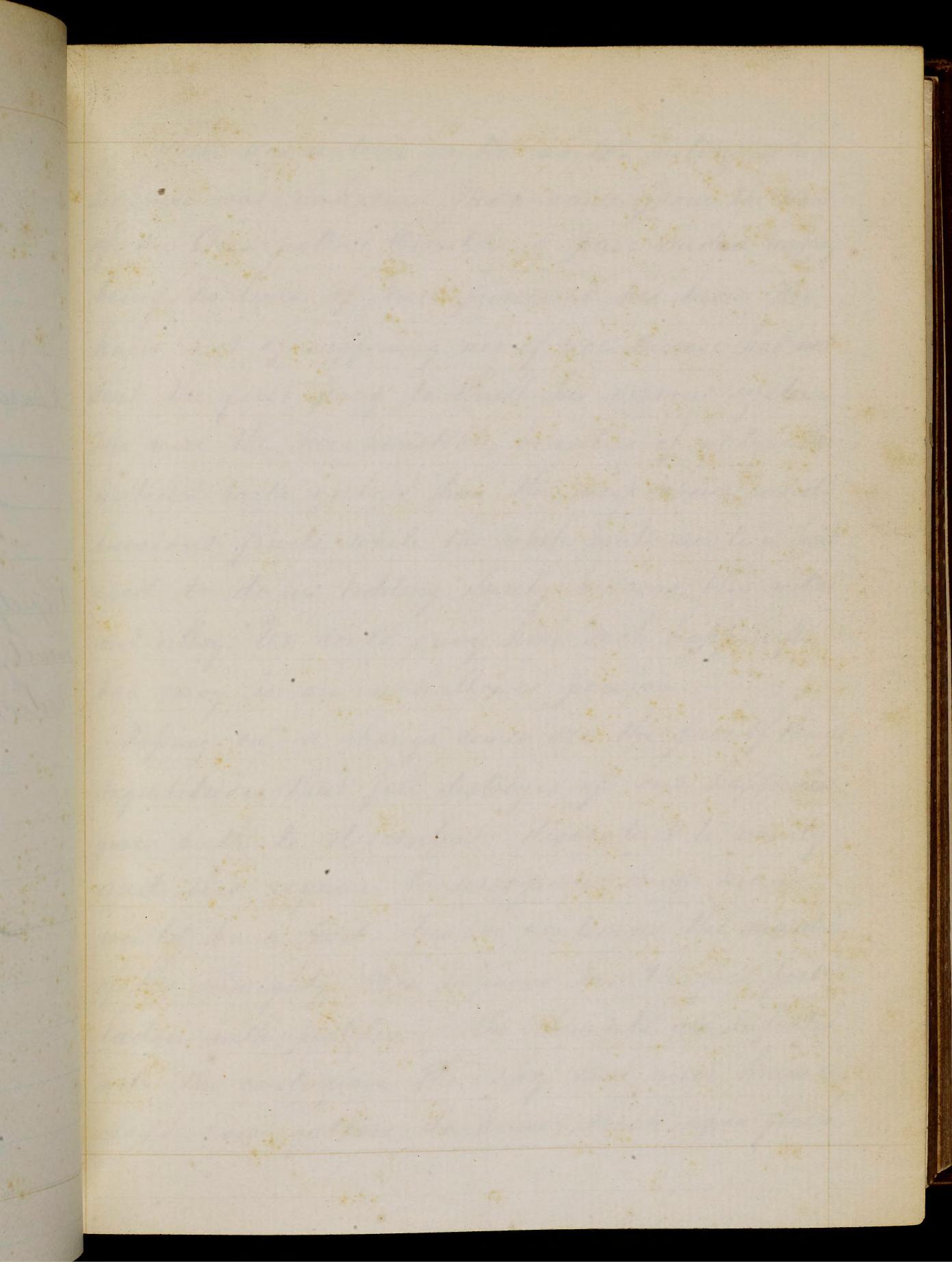
---

By

John S. Rankin  
of  
Pittsburgh

---

January 9<sup>th</sup> 1858.



There was a time in the world's history when sickness was unknown. Man came from the hand of an Omnipotent Creator a pure and a happy being. No lines of care furrowed his brow. He knew not of suffering nor of woe. Disease had not sent the first pang to thrill his nervous system. His were the inexhaustible beauties of nature. The un-tilled earth yielded him the most choice and luscious fruits; while the whole brute creation hastened to do his bidding. Surely his was bliss without alloy. We could envy him such happiness; but envy is an un-hallowed passion. - - -

Passing on, a change comes over the face of things. Ingratitude, that fell destroyer of our happiness gives birth to discontent; discontent to vanity, and this again, to arrogance; and man would be a God. Yea, he contemns the mandate of the Almighty. His impious breath goes forth laden with pestilence. The elements are infected with the contagion. The sky that never knew a cloud now gathers darkness. Flash upon flash

of the vivid lightning illumines the threatening face of heaven, as if sent to destroy the poison ere it shall have done its work.

The brute creation, until now, so ~~dear~~ gentle and obedient, howl defiance at their lord.

The mountains grow even more rugged, and each mineral constituent takes to itself a specific portion of the infection that prevails around. The beauteous plants and trees, decked in resplendent flower jewels, do not cast aside these glorious mantles for very sorrow as 'twould seem they should, but embodying portions of the malaria, yet retain all their former loveliness, as if to tempt man, their admirer to still deeper woe and death.

Nor does man, himself, escape the poisonous influences which his own sin has generated. Disease, hydra-headed, comes upon him. But his frame is firmly knit; his sinews are like the tempered steel; and so rugged is his constitution, that he manfully withstands the

aggressor. He battles heroically, till at length nature is overpowered and he yields to the sentence, "thou shalt surely die."

Time flies on, and under the blighting influence of disease his days are narrowed down from almost a thousand years to three score and ten. Nor is the spoiler content with this trophy, but with ruthless hand he hurls his darts even at a prostrate foe. That noble organism, man's pride and glory, is racked with pain, it writhes in agony. hideous deformity supplants his former beauty and a countless train of ills makes life itself a burden. Alas! how sad the change from bliss beyond degree to such abject misery.

But is there no escape? Is there no balm in gilead," wherewith to alleviate his physical sufferings? A voice replies, there is. Yes, a gracious Father, who, by deepest pity moved, gave his own son to heal the moral woes of fallen man; provides also for the amelioration

of his physical ills. He looks in compassion upon his erring creatures, and at the smile of his countenance, the very curse is changed to blessing. Through the action of a general law the three kingdoms, animal, vegetable and mineral, have imbibed portions of the poison; each individual appropriating that for which it has an affinity. Now each of these embodiments separately is injurious to man. This is the curse.

By another general law it is ordained that similar embodiments of these noxious principles in different individuals, shall antagonize or antidote each other. This is the blessing. Here, then, we see that medicines, and the law to regulate their use are coeval with the first inroads of disease. This law is "Similia".

Man may at first have had an intuitive knowledge of the poisonous effects of drugs; not so of their relation to disease.

This was left unrevealed, to be discovered by experience and unfolded by reason. Thus arose the necessity for Physicians.

In all ages the sympathies of the benevolent have been enlisted in the cause of human suffering. In the earliest times we read of the sick being placed by the highways, that travellers might prescribe for them such remedies as had been found useful in similar cases. Here was the first dawn of Empirical Medicine, and much good was sometimes accomplished in this way. But ignorance generally rendered these well meant efforts either futile, or absolutely injurious; and hence the necessity that some should devote their whole attention to this subject. A distinct Caste was thus formed in Society. Those who entered this caste were called Physicians, or nature producers, it being their province to restore the invalid to natural health and vigor. Under this arrangement progress began. It was slow at first, and

not always in the right direction, as the Physician had to contend with his own ignorance as well as the prejudices of the times. The light of nature had become obscured, and science, yet in its infancy, gave forth but a lurid gleam into the darkness which reigned around. When we consider the difficulties with which the early Apostles of Medicine had to contend, their heroic efforts fill us with admiration. The great Hippocrates more than two thousand years ago, taught lessons of wisdom which it would be well for some of his disciples of the present day to consider. His discerning eye caught a glimpse of the fundamental law of cure; but his ideas of polypharmacy prevented him from making it available.

Others after him hinted at the same. Jenner proposes Vaccination as a preventive of Small-pox, and thus, perhaps without himself understanding why, gives us the

clearest embodiment of natures law. But it remained for the illustrious Hahnemann to demonstrate fully its existence and also to remove the obstacles to its general application.

But to return; the Physician is to be the almoner to the sick of the sympathies of the benevolent. To him is committed the sacred task of ministering exclusively to the afflicted, and thus discharging for society a debt which all acknowledge.

Granting, then, that it is his province to restore health to the afflicted or to minister to their well being; what qualifications are necessary to fit the Physician for his arduous work?

If we look upon him as a mechanic, called to regulate the deranged action of a most complicated machine; his skill should correspond to the exigencies of the case.

Turning then to man the machine, with

the Philosophers eye we see him composed of pulleys, of levers and of planes; and these again made up of tissues so minute as to be beyond the ken of unaided vision. Here is an osseous framework, giving great strength, and yet allowing of facile motion. This again is clothed in muscles that are wonderfully adapted to the functions they are to perform. Here you behold the the strong fibred deltoid, the beautiful gastrocnemius, and the delicate plantaris.

Looking within we see a miniature laboratory developing an almost unlimited play of affinities; performing the analyses and syntheses of the Chemist without his supervision and beyond his control.

But time would fail us to speak of all the organs of this truly marvelous machine. When we consider their nice adaptations, the symmetry of their proportions,

the extreme delicacy of their tissues, and yet remember the importance of each to the integrity of the whole organism, we can but wonder and admire, or with the Poet exclaim—

"Strange that a harp of thousand strings  
Should keep in tune so long"

What then should be the knowledge and the skill of him who proposes to regulate this complex yet fragile machine? And if man the machine requires so much, what shall we say of man the living, acting, thinking being. If man inanimate commands so much our admiration, with what awe should he be approached when animated by the vital principle, keeping all these complicated organs in harmonious action; and crowning all, a mind the image of Divinity. Mind, itself a prey to disease, while yet it sympathizes with,

and thus complicates, those of its physical tenement. There is ample field for the most profound study.

The Physician should understand fully the normal as well as abnormal states of this organism. He should be able to detect every deviation from health, that he may know when medication is required. Added to this, he must have an accurate acquaintance with all those therapeutic agents which a benevolent Creator has provided, for healing the maladies of his erring creatures.

In view of all this, the Physician, overwhelmed by a sense of his ignorance, and of the vastness of the work that stretches out before him, would perhaps shrink from the task; but he looks around him, and suffering humanity claims his aid.

Glancing toward heaven, he hears those cheering words, "Fear not, I am with thee,

and will help thee." Gathering new courage, he presses forward, resolved to master every thing that promises to assist him in battling with the common foe. And thus armed with proven weapons, he confronts the raging pestilence, and stays the hand of the destroyer.

He enters the hovel of the poor as well as the palace of the great. Here we see him soothing the agonies of a sufferer; there inhaling the poisonous effluvia from a contagious distemper. Surely no sordid motives induce him to incur such momentous risks. But relying upon Omnipotence for protection and support, he goes forth to conquer or to die.

Tis here we see the Physician in his true character. Noble, generous, self-sacrificing, he perils his own life to rescue others from the grave. To him "the drying up a single tear has more of honest fame than shedding seas of gore". How like his il-

lustrious prototype, the great Physician, of whom it is written that he went about doing good, and healing all manner of sickness and disease among the people. And can the character of the Physician be other than noble, when his profession is thus heaven born. Ancient Greece and Rome gave great Philosophers and Statesmen to the world, but Heaven gave the Great Physician.

It may be true that some have entered the ranks with unworthy motives. Nay more, that avarice and unhallowed ambition have brought in so many that they have given to the profession their own moral tone. But does it follow that all are such? Rather does not the alloy point to the genuine metal, and even demonstrate its existence? If there was a Judas in the first class of Medical Students, does any one conclude that all were such then, or that any should be such now? If a Simon Magus desired this

13

sacred office only to subserve his selfish ends, was he not justly rebuked for his covetousness?

But turning from the alloy, let us again seek the pure gold. The Physician has learned "the luxury of doing good". He does not practice his profession merely for its gains. True he must needs look after a competence for himself and his family, but besides this he has higher and nobler objects in view. Motives he has which are beyond the comprehension of sordid minds. His sympathy for the suffering "thrills in each nerve and lives in all the heart." It leads him to quit the comforts and endearments of home, to enter the abodes of wretchedness and woe. Under its benign influence he rises with alacrity from his grateful couch, and hastens forth amid thick darkness and the howling storm, to soothe the agonies of

a suffering mortal. Let us accompany him on his errand of mercy. Our steps are directed to a stately mansion. We are ushered into the sick chamber. All is death-like silence, broken ever and anon by the stifled sighs of a heart-broken mother. Reclining there, is one whose lamp of life seems almost extinct. The relentless destroyer has seized upon her vitals. Neither youth nor beauty, nor the devoted love of parents whose idol she is, can ward off the fatal shaft. That hectic flush which lights up her countenance only speaks of the fires that are raging within. The Physician approaches, and takes that wan palm in his. The pulse runs high. He speaks words of comfort, then administering the proper remedy, he tarries to mark its effects. The rose that illuminated those thin cheeks gradually loses its scarlet lustre; the pulse becomes more calm, and the gentle sufferer sinks

into refreshing slumber. He turns him to those anxious Parents and breathing words of sympathy, departs.

Next we enter an humble cot. Here a Father, the only stay of a numerous family is prostrated by fever. In his wild ravings he talks of a suffering wife and starving children. That manly frame is but a shadow of its former self. Those sunken eyes point to a speedy dissolution. But see, the Physician approaches; a tear of gratitude fills the eye of that tender wife and mother. Hope is awakened in her heart. Even the half clad children around the hearth stone, cease their prattle in awe of one to whom they look with trusting confidence. He comes to the bed-side and gently soothes that feverish brow. Again his skill is tried and again he departs triumphant. Another and yet another patient is visited, and similar scenes are enacted; but

we must take our leave, though we part from him reluctantly. Surely blessings must lie in the path of one whose whole life is a constant stream of benevolence.

Having thus briefly considered the heavenly origin and the divine sanction of the Medical Profession, we have inferred the nobility of the Physician and the excellence of his character. We have glanced at his preparatory labors; we have looked upon him in the discharge of his arduous duties, and now, in concluding, let us urge upon the Student who is about to enter this sacred profession, the importance of thorough preparation. He should also consider well the dignity and the responsibility of the office he assumes, that he may be actuated by proper motives. He shall thus be a blessing to humanity and an honor to this noblest of earthly callings.